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Reagan Defends Covert Rebel Aid in Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON—President Reagan said Wednesday that Congress would set "a very dangerous precedent" if it cut off covert aid to guerrilla "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua, implying that they have as legitimate a right to represent the citizens of Nicaragua as does the Sandinista government.

Asserting that the leftist Sandinistas came to power "out of the barrel of a gun," Reagan asked rhetorically: "Other than being in control of the capital and having a handle on all the levers, what makes them any more a legitimate government than the people of Nicaragua who are asking for a chance to vote for the kind of government they want?"

Not Just Salvador Arms

Many of the guerrillas now battling the Nicaraguan government are disillusioned former revolutionaries who fought with the Sandinistas when they overthrew the military dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979, Reagan said. But they were "betrayed," the President declared, when the Sandinistas, after seizing power, refused to keep their promises to call elections and move toward democracy.

Reagan, answering questions from six reporters during a 35-minute interview in the Oval Office, took his argument for providing covert aid to the Nicaraguan guerrillas a step beyond his previous statements—that the sole purpose of the assistance is to help sever the Sandinistas' supply of arms to the rebels battling U.S.-backed government troops in El Salvador.

The President acknowledged that the Nicaraguan guerrillas are using U.S. arms against the Sandinista government and did not express concern about it.

A law, signed in December by Reagan as an amendment to an appropriations bill, forbids U.S. assistance "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking a military confrontation between Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras.

Reagan on Wednesday sloughed off the issue of whether the U.S.-supported guerrillas are trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government, declaring "these forces that have risen up in opposition to the Sandinista government are people who simply want this government of Nicaragua to keep its promises."

"Many of these people are businessmen whose businesses have been taken over," Reagan said. "They are farmers whose land was seized by this government. And they're protesting this violation of what had made them support the revolution to begin with."

Using this and other reasoning, Reagan several times in the interview referred to the Nicaraguan guerrillas as "freedom fighters." But he said the rebels in El Salvador are "guerrillas," not freedom fighters, "because they've got freedom already and are fighting against an elected government."

The Democratic-controlled House Intelligence Committee, on a 9-5 party-line vote, approved legislation Tuesday to cut off funds for covert operations by the anti-Sandinista rebels. The measure authorizes overt aid to Central American nations for the purpose of interdicting arms supplies from Nicaragua and Cuba to guerrillas attempting to overthrow governments.

Reagan criticized the political "partisanship" of the committee vote. And he said that if the proposal ever became law, "it would set a very dangerous precedent" by "literally taking away the ability of the Executive Branch to carry out its constitutional responsibilities" to conduct foreign policy.

The President objected to "the restrictions" the committee voted to put on any overt aid—limitations such as allowing it to be earmarked only for governments, not guerrillas. He said the other Central American governments might not want to "give that money to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua."

Again defending the supplying of U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan guerrillas, Reagan said, "The whole purpose of the Sandinista government seems to be not only (helping rebels in) El Salvador, but the export of revolution to other nations." He cited Honduras and Costa Rica as being "plagued by radicals in their midst who are encouraged by the Sandinista government."

Earlier, White House spokesman Larry Speakes, reading a prepared statement, complained that cutting off covert aid would "tie our hands" and amount to "an unnecessary restriction" in "influencing Sandinista behavior." He said the legislation would "acquiesce in the ongoing use of Nicaraguan territory as a sanctuary for (Salvadoran) insurgents."

Meanwhile, The Times learned that CIA Director William J. Casey told members of Congress this week that if U.S. funds for covert operations were cut off, the anti-Sandinista effort would essentially crumble. He said the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) guerrillas have relied heavily on U.S. funds, training and arms.

The question-and-answer session with Reagan was the second of its kind recently in which presidential advisers, seeking to make the President more accessible to the press, have invited six White House reporters to interview him.

The interviewers have represented a mixture from the press corps and this time was composed of reporters from the Dallas Morning News, Copley Newspapers, The New York Times, U.S. News & World Report, NBC-TV and the New York Daily News. The Oval Office session was piped by intercom to the rest of the press corps sitting in the White House press room.